

**CEPPS/IRI Bulgaria Report: April-June 2005**  
**Bulgaria: Political Party Assistance Program for Parliamentary Elections 2005**  
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## **I. SUMMARY**

Bulgaria has just completed the 2005 parliamentary elections. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) took 31% of the vote, while the ruling center-right National Movement for Simeon II (NMSII), led by Bulgaria's ex-king and premier Simeon Saxe-Coburg took 20%. The ethnic Turkish party, Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), came in third with 13% of the vote. The traditional center-right parties polled worse than the far-right Attack (Ataka) party which took 8% of the vote. The coalition of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) received only 7.5% of the vote.

With the elections over, the political parties are now beginning the task of evaluating their campaign performance and examining their prospects for the new parliament. The parties of the center-right are facing a very uncertain future as they emerge from, what was for them, a disastrous election cycle. The low voter turnout was especially high among the voters that traditionally support the center-right. This is likely to start a period of realignment, as all the parties on the center-right struggle to redefine themselves. If the center-right parties persist with the political infighting and public battles among their leaders that marked the pre-election period, they will likely face a situation where they no longer have enough public support to enter parliament in future elections. Efforts to encourage the political parties to transform themselves into organizations that advocate issue-based agendas rather than personality-based agendas will be crucial to the center-right parties' survivability. IRI plans to work with the major political parties to conduct post-election analysis and to develop 'out of election cycle' strategies that will re-connect the parties to their traditional voter base.

## **II. BACKGROUND**

After being hailed by many as the most successful country in making the transition to democracy in the Balkans in the 1990s, Bulgaria's political party system has suffered a setback in the last several years. This has called into question the survivability of some of the political parties, especially on the center-right. The problem dates back to an early failure of the democracy movement to transform itself into a stable political party and has now led to severe fracturing among the center-right parties caused by ongoing personality differences between the leaders. The effect of these splits has divided the center-right vote and has effectively pushed a sizeable number of center-right voters out of the process. As an illustration of this problem during the recent campaign, at one of the debates attended by the leaders of the various parties participating, four of the most influential leaders of the democracy movement in the 1990s were each representing a different party. The parties' popularity is faltering and they are suffering from increasing internal conflict and disorganization. By concentrating on personality differences

among various political leaders, the political parties have failed to identify or effectively address issues of popular concern in campaigns. Naturally, media coverage of political parties focuses largely on infighting, adding to already high levels of voter dissatisfaction.

The instability of Bulgaria's political party system, which has a tendency to produce surprises in election results, was again demonstrated in this election. In 2001, the National Movement Simeon II (NMSII) sent shockwaves by winning half of the seats in parliament, even though the movement was formed only three months before the election. The June election surprised many by the combination of low voter turnout and the unexpectedly good showing for the nationalist party, Ataka. The latest drop in voter participation support to around 50% suggests a rejection of the party political system. Ataka, a far-right party, has existed for several years, but only now has broken through the 4% barrier. Their ability to not only enter parliament, but leapfrog all the center-right parties to become the fourth largest party in parliament, is another example of disaffection of the electorate with the mainstream political parties and the crisis in Bulgaria's political party system.

The future cohesion and effectiveness of Bulgaria's traditional political parties is not assured. NMSII has experienced the fate of all previous democratically elected governments in Bulgaria, namely rejection by the voters when it attempted to be re-elected. Unless the movement is able to create a coalition with the BSP and the MRF, with Simeon Saxe-Coburg possibly taking the prime minister post, NMSII's future is not certain.

The center-right parties, including the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), the Free Democrats (UFD) and the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria (DSB) are deeply divided and combined. They suffered a worse defeat than the discredited center-right government four years ago. Relentless infighting and a very public split between the central figures of the center-right, UDF Chair Nadezhda Mihailova, DSB Chair and former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov and Sofia mayor and UFD Chair Stefan Sofianski have served to erode public support for all three of the center-right parties. It is unclear whether these parties recognize that they face the political wilderness unless they can either replace their leadership with fresh faces that do not carry the personal baggage of the present leaderships or whether the current leaders will acknowledge that they must work together.

Although the BSP received the largest share of the vote, it still remains severely divided between the reformist, modern social democratic leadership and a large faction of traditional socialist members. Although that traditional socialist base carried it to the position of the largest party in the new parliament, the real reason for its success can be traced to the fact that its main opposition performed so poorly. The divisions within the BSP will most likely come under a great deal of stress as the leadership attempts to build a sustainable coalition with two other parties, necessitating a number of compromises in order form a government.

The MRF, a small party representing the Bulgarian Turks, once again emerged from the 2005 elections as a central player in the creation of any new government. In the pre-election period, MRF touted its ability to be a potential coalition partner to the BSP. Its bargaining position was slightly limited when the combined result of BSP and MRF failed to pass the required number of seats for a majority (121), which will require a third coalition partner. However, the MRF's

leaders, who have proved to be skillful negotiators, will most likely continue to expand both their representation in parliament and ministries and develop a stronger voice in national policy.

The success of Ataka is of concern to the future of political process in Bulgaria. The conditions that made the extreme right's breakthrough possible are worrisome, as well. Among those factors has been the splintering of the center right, which may be serving to disillusion some of their traditional supporters and pushing them further right. The constant infighting between the Bulgarian parties that has allowed the MRF to take advantage of the situation and exact a hefty price from various governments at the expense of the average Bulgarian has also increased the far right's support. Several of the issues that were driving local campaigns during this election cycle were related to minority issues, either to the Roma or the Turkish community. There are also several structural factors that are working to assist the far right. The proportional voting system makes it possible for a far right party to break through. Moreover, the Bulgarian economy is beginning to improve and the growing gap in incomes that comes with this type of development may tend to increase the support for the far right. This observation is not an attempt to spread panic, rather it is meant to raise awareness. The far right has little ability to become a major force in Bulgarian politics, but like many other countries in Europe, the far right can have a terribly disrupting effect on the country's politics. On the other hand the rise of the far right may serve to push the center right back together.

### **III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES**

During this reporting period, IRI expanded its program at the request of the US Embassy and USAID to include additional public opinion research, an additional \$50K in funding, and extension of the program until December 31, 2005.

During this reporting period, IRI stepped up its program activities significantly leading up to the elections. Between April and June, IRI implemented three national public opinion polls, two panels of undecided voters, a series of focus groups and training seminars. IRI continued to work with the local firm Market Links and U.S.-based polling consultant David Williams to conduct the public opinion research. IRI contracted political party consultant Martin Minns through the middle of May. From the last week of May until June, IRI sent Lee Peterson to continue the political party consulting work through the elections.

#### *Second and third national polls*

A major component of IRI's program in Bulgaria is a comprehensive public opinion polling project. IRI's polls aim at exploring public attitudes towards individual parties and key campaign issues.

IRI, in conjunction with the local polling agency, Market Links and the US-based pollster David Williams designed and fielded the second national poll during the first week of April and the third poll during the first week of May. IRI allowed each of the major political parties to add several questions to the questionnaires. IRI presented the polling data to USAID and the US Embassy. IRI also presented the polling results to all of the major political parties so that they would be able to test various campaign messages and track public opinion on those messages.

IRI's polling consultant David Williams and IRI party consultant Martin Minns traveled to Sofia in April and May to present the poll results to the political parties, USAID and the US Embassy. The results were also used during meetings and training sessions with political parties.

IRI surveyed 1,060 adults in the April poll and 1,215 in the May poll, and compared the results with the previous polls in order to track opinion and political trends as election day approached. The April poll found that most Bulgarians continued to be roughly split in their opinion whether their country is going to the right direction or not. Over 36% believed that the country was going in the wrong direction, a slight increase from the March 2005 survey. Meanwhile, there was a significant drop in the percentage showing that people believe the country is going in the right direction. Only 24% believed that the country was going in the right direction, a 4% drop from the March poll. The May poll showed a significant increase in the respondents believing the country was going in the right direction and a decrease of respondents believing the country was going in the wrong direction. The percentages were almost equal, at about 30%.

The number of respondents who feel that they are economically worse off than they were two years ago continued to dip to 43% in April and May, compared to 45.6% in March. Both the April and May polls showed an increase of people believing their economic situations will get better, 25% and 27% respectively. Meanwhile, the number of people responding that their economic situations will get worse in one year dropped from 17.4% in March, to 17% in April and 15% in May.

The surveys continued to show an overall dissatisfaction with the current government. In fact, the April poll showed a +9% differential in respondents showing frustration with the government, saying that it does not deserve reelection. The poll showed 59% in the April poll and a slight drop to 52% in the May poll. Overall, the data showed that the numbers of people who were unhappy with the government were approaching the high levels seen in 2004. For instance, in March 2004 over 60% answered that the current government does not deserve reelection. While none of the political parties showed outstanding support for another chance to form a government, the BSP had a +4% differential showing in the May poll as opposed to the April poll. The poll results for the UDF fluctuated slightly, but overall stayed at a significant negative of 61%-63% between March and May. After an improvement from 60% negative opinion in March 2004 to 50% negative in March 2005, the NMSII suffered a setback garnering a negative opinion of 58% in April and a slight improvement in May showing 55%. The question that best reflects how people in general feel about the political party options before them is "Do you think that there is a party which addresses the problems you care about. If so, which party is it?" Over the past three polls the number of people responding "there is no such party" has slightly decreased, but the percentage remains significantly high at 55%.

#### *June pre-election poll*

At the request of the US Embassy and USAID, IRI conducted an additional poll from June 9 to 15, about one week before the elections. Unlike the previous public opinion polls, IRI presented the results of the June poll only to the US Embassy and USAID officials. IRI surveyed 1,305 adults for the June poll. On June 21, political party consultant Lee Peterson, polling consultant David Williams and IRI Washington-based staff member Nesti Gjeluçi met with the US

Ambassador, embassy officials and USAID staff to present the results of the June poll and discuss the political situation leading up to the elections.

Overall, the June poll did not contain any radical changes compared to the results of the previous polls. There were however some changes worth noting. There was a significant increase of the people believing their economic situation will get better in one year, from 27% in May to 38% in June, while there was a slight decrease in the percentage of people who believe that their economic situation will get worse, from 15% in May to 11% in June.

Public opinion held steady from March through June regarding the question whether the current government deserved reelection, at a negative 57%. The BSP gained a +2 differential in support for a chance to be reelected.

In retrospect, IRI's survey data was very close to the results of the June 25 elections. Even the surprising factor of the support for the nationalist party Ataka showed in the IRI polls in the last two months before elections. IRI brought this up during the presentation with the embassy and USAID as one of the concerns of this year's elections.

For complete information on these results, please see the attached PowerPoint presentations.

### Meetings

During this reporting period, IRI had several meetings with government and political party officials, as well as with officials from USAID and the U.S. Embassy.

-On April 4, APO Milena Nedeva met with Ivan Krastev, chairman of the Center for Liberal Strategies (CLS) to discuss the current political situation and the CLS involvement as outside experts and advisors.

-On April 11, Milena Nedeva met with NMSII Campaign Manager Lidia Shuleva to coordinate IRI's media training seminar for NMSII national leaders and spokespersons.

-On April 14, Milena Nedeva met with Svetoslav Spasov, MP and Head of the Youth NMSII to coordinate Martin Minns's participation as a trainer in the youth seminar scheduled for April 24.

-On April 15, Milena Nedeva met with NMSII campaign staff and US consultants Stefana Yaneva, Dick Dresner and Elena Valcheva to coordinate upcoming events.

-On April 19, US pollster David Williams, political consultant Martin Minns and Milena Nedeva gave a polling presentation for the UDF national staff and the US consultants Mariana Elenska, Nikolai Mladenov and Ian Marquardt. The next day, they presented the polling results to the BSP national campaign staff and party officials.

-On April 21, Martin Minns, David Williams, Milena Nedeva met with Bob Wickers, NMSII campaign consultant to coordinate campaign assistance activities for the NMSII.

-On May 3, Milena Nedeva met with Daniela Simeonova, Head of Shuleva's campaign staff in Lovech to discuss their request for IRI assistance for the campaign with respect to planning and carrying out a door-to-door effort in the Lovech district.

-On May 9, Milena Nedeva met with consultant Ian Marquardt to coordinate the guidelines for the focus groups that IRI was scheduled to conduct for the UDF. The participants decided that dial tests would be carried out for UDF campaign ads.

-On May 17, David Williams, Martin Minns and Milena Nedeva met with CLS Chairman Ivan Krastev to discuss current political situation and potential strategies for the upcoming campaign.

-On May 18, David Williams, Martin Minns and Milena Nedeva met with Bob Wickers to talk about NMSII current campaign strategies and latest IRI polling results.

-On May 30, political party consultant Lee Peterson met with Nikolai Mladenov to fine-tune the agenda of the local training seminars and consultations scheduled for the UDF local campaign staff.

-On June 21, David Williams, Lee Peterson and Nesti Gjeluçi met with U.S. Ambassador James Pardew and USAID officials to present the June poll results and discuss the political situation leading up to the parliamentary elections.

-On June 22, David Williams, Lee Peterson, Milena Nedeva and IRI Washington staff Nesti Gjeluçi met with Miroslav Borshosh to discuss the current situation in the center-right in general and UDF in particular with a view of the expected election loss.

-On June 23, David Williams, Lee Peterson, Nesti Gjeluçi and Milena Nedeva met with Iliya Lazarov, former chief of staff of President Stoyanov, to discuss Stoyanov's role in post-election developments in the UDF and possible scenarios for post-election government coalitions.

-On June 23, David Williams, Lee Peterson and Nesti Gjeluçi met with Gene Gibson, Chief of Democracy and Local Governance Office USAID/Bulgaria to discuss future IRI programming and the possibility of a no-cost extension.

### *Focus Groups*

IRI conducted two focus groups with non-voters in Sofia and Vratsa during the second week of June. This was a very helpful tool to find out reasons of apathy and discontent among voters towards the current government and other center-right coalitions. Some of the views that were expressed in the focus groups are:

- *I am definitely not indifferent and apathetic. I voted for NMSII. I trusted them and hoped that they have the skills to cope with the situation. All the parties come to power and try to put things in order and then the next party replaces them and undoes everything.*
- *I will not vote to teach them (NMII) a lesson. If they lie, we will not elect them.*

- *I think that there are no good politicians here. They all craft such laws that are to the advantage of their parties and companies. A good politician makes sure that the law is good for everybody.*
- *They (center-right coalition) could not stay together and people lost faith*
- *The leaders of the party lists are unknown.*

Please see the complete findings of the focus groups attached.

#### **IV. RESULTS/ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

**Result 1** Major political parties run effective campaigns focused on issues of concern.

##### **Indicators**

- A. Written campaign plans for national and party branch offices are designed and implemented.
- B. IRI-trained candidates and campaign managers address issues of concern in their election campaign.

During the month of May and the first week of June, IRI held several training and awareness meetings throughout many regions of the country to talk to party officials in the local level and make them aware of the issues that came out during the surveys and focus groups. Some local branches of several political parties were more prepared than others. Most parties at the local level were enthusiastic to receive IRI's assistance and training and had specific requests regarding the areas of assistance. Campaign staff of the UDF, ADF and NMSII parties were eager to learn what issues of concern had come out of IRI's focus groups. IRI was well-equipped to provide campaign assistance that was specific to the area as opposed to a boiler-plate training format. For example, on June 1, party consultant Lee Peterson and IRI staff Milena Nedeva went to Pleven to work with the campaign staff of the ADF and UDF coalitions. According to the polls, the coalition was running second to the BSP. The relatively good standing was due to the fact that all the candidates running in this region were local candidates, led by the highly popular mayor of Pleven, Naiden Zelenogorski. During the focus groups, IRI learned that one of the major issues for the voters here was whether Pleven would become the center of the southwestern planning region in Bulgaria. IRI worked with the campaign staff to bring this issue to the forefront of the campaign, using several targeting techniques that proved successful.

One of the main issues that several campaign staff expressed was how to use specific issues to target voters. By May, IRI already had compiled helpful results for its polls and focus groups that proved helpful in this regard. Local party branches were able to incorporate IRI's advice regarding developing a campaign message to target specific voters. With IRI's help, the UDF

branch in Gabrovo created and implemented a comprehensive campaign plan. Due to the plan, the party was able to recruit volunteers and engage them directly in voter contact.

Compared to previous working sessions with local party branches, IRI was pleasantly surprised that candidates and their campaign staff were quite sophisticated in putting out their campaign themes and messages. The NMSII in Veliko Turnovo, with IRI's guidance, outlined programs incorporating a specific set of issues upon which they ran their campaigns; issues which spoke directly to the problems of the citizens in those cities. IRI also encouraged many candidates to take neighborhood walks two or three times a week and engage in face-to-face discussions with voters on issues of their concern. IRI warned candidates to manage the expectations of the voters and make realistic campaign promises.

**Result 2** Major parties utilize public opinion polling to lead issue-oriented campaigns.

### **Indicators**

- A. Parties develop campaign messages that reflect the issues identified in public opinion polling.
- B. Party activists are trained on the uses of public opinion research and parties undertake such efforts on their own.
- C. IRI-trained candidates and campaign managers address issues of concern in their election campaign.

IRI used the public opinion polls conducted in March, April and May to show political party leaders where the public stands on issues such as the economic future of their families, unemployment, trust in the current government or other potential future governments, NATO and EU accession, and the presence of troops in Iraq, among other issues. The data from the polls proved to be a very effective tool to give political leaders a reality check. While progress was made in the awareness among party members, IRI recognizes the challenge it faces to bring about change within the leadership of all center-right parties. The awareness of the overall public support for the government and specific parties is much clearer among party members that are not in leadership roles. Breaking that gap of information remains a challenge.

IRI went to the Veliko Turnovo and Gabrovo regions and met with the campaign staff of the UDF and NMSII to help them shape the campaign around local issues. Again, the strategy worked since most of the candidates came from the local region and understood the issues quite well. IRI provided assistance to the campaign staff to develop better and more updated voter lists and improving voter targeting in the district. One of the techniques that IRI focused on was the direct mail technique, which was not being used very much during the campaign.

During the month of May, IRI went to the region of Varna and met with UDF and NMSII campaign staff. The campaign staff explained to IRI that the main challenge for them had been translating the national campaign message to the local context. For instance, one of the issues of



the NMSII's campaign was unemployment, but this issue was not as important for the Varna region. IRI worked with the campaign staff to define campaign messages which were relevant to the region, yet did not lose the general tone and style of the party's campaign.

When IRI returned to several of these regions in early June, several of the UDF local organizations, including Veliko Turnovo and Burgas, had taken up issues identified through polling. They attempted to use these issues as the centerpiece of their campaigns, but their late adoption of the issues made it difficult for them to gain any credibility with the electorate.

**Result 3** Major parties create and use voter identification models to run effective campaigns.

### **Indicators**

- A. Campaigns of the major political parties develop strategies for direct voter contact.
- B. Political parties implement voter outreach programs and maintain records of voters contacted.

During tours in several regions of the country, IRI faced the continuing challenge in demonstrating to political party officials how alienated from politics most voters are. This awareness was stronger among local party branches than among party headquarters in the capital or larger cities. The polling results were also a tool that proved quite helpful in trying to convince party officials about voters' opinions on politics and politicians. It was obvious, for instance, from discussions with parties after the polling presentations that, prior to receiving the data, they did not have an appreciation of how wide the gap between parties and the electorate truly was.

Many campaigns in the local level, however, had done impressive work to reach out to voters. Even so, they needed assistance and asked IRI for it. During a trip in the third week of May, IRI encountered several ADF campaigns that had compiled petitions, both local and national, in the run up to the campaign, but had not converted the names on the petitions to potential voters lists. While in consultations with local organizations in Pleven, Dobrich, Gobrovo, Varna and Burgas, IRI focused on the use of national petitions to compile local voter lists and how to use them in the campaign. IRI staff worked with the campaign to turn national issues into local terms so that they are more recognizable messages. IRI recommended the campaigns simplify their messages on such things as agriculture-related issues where much of the debate seemed to confuse the electorate.

In a training session with the NMSII local campaign of Burgas, IRI advised the campaign staff to work with minority groups during the campaign. Minority issues came out fairly strongly during focus groups. Also, since the main candidate in this region was the Foreign Minister Solomon Pasi, IRI advised to use the issue of Bulgaria joining the EU as a main focus of the campaign. Since Mr. Pasi was popular among young voters, IRI advised that this route would be a good move to target young voters and bring them to the polls, as well.

IRI staff held similar training sessions with party officials and campaign staff of NMSII and UDF in Sliven, Yambol and Plovdiv. Many campaign staff members implemented outreach techniques that they learned during these training sessions.

For additional information, please see Result 1.

## **V. FUTURE ACTIVITIES**

IRI has received approval on a no cost extension request to USAID in order to bring back a polling consultant and a political party consultant in the fall to implement a post-election poll and a number of focus groups and assessment missions around the country. IRI's poll will explore public attitudes, particularly the attitudes of youth, women, and ethnic minorities, toward individual political parties and key local campaign issues. IRI will use the same firm and methodology already developed as part of the CEPPS program.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

April national poll

May national poll

June national poll

Non-voter focus groups

## Main Conclusions

### Focus Groups with non-voters Vratsa and Sofia

#### Methodology

Number of groups	2
Number of participants	21
Participants' profile	Non-voters who voted in 2001 25-50 years of age 50% women / 50% men
Dates	8, 10 June

Statistical data shows that 10% of all voters in Bulgaria have never voted. Given the existing mobility of the population one can make the conclusion that non-voting is not a consistent pattern typical for the Bulgarian voter, but is rather a form of protest.

- I am definitely not indifferent and apathetic. I voted for NMSII. I trusted them and hoped that they have the skills to cope with the situation. All the parties come to power and try to put things in order and then the next party replaces them and undoes everything.*

The opinions expressed in both groups show that those people who decided not to vote in the upcoming elections still have an interest in the elections. They are actively political and follow the democratic process. This type of active behavior is not entirely negative because they do point to a number of achievements of the government.

The main criticisms to the NMSII government are specific and based on the practical experience of the voters – problems with education, health care, tax collection, income.

The disappointment with the NMSII government is attributed to the political class as a whole. The promises not kept, the lack of ethics in government and corruption are perceived as typical for all politicians regardless of party. There is no difference made between the political parties and the participants do not see an alternative.

- I will not vote to teach them a lesson. If they lie, we will not elect them.*
- I think that there are no good politicians here. They all craft such laws that are to the advantage of their parties and companies. A good politician makes sure that the law is good for everybody.*

The main reason to abstain from voting is dissatisfaction with all political parties. BSP is not being perceived as a modern party. The increase in the support of the BSP is being explained with the illusion that the party will carry out a social policy similar to the one of the Communist Party in the past. There is also big disappointment with the center-right parties. They are seen as unreliable political force which is split into small fractions that are very similar to each other.

The center-right coalitions fail to gain support because they are perceived as opportunist and false.

- *They could not stay together and people lost faith.*

A solution to the problem which the respondents in both groups recommended is for the politicians to be personally responsible and accountable to the voters. This is why the voters would prefer a majoritarian system and a presidential republic. Personal responsibility is seen as a guarantee for delivery on promises.

The need for new parties and new faces is still widely advocated as a means to change the model of being in politics in Bulgaria.

- *The leaders of the party lists are unknown.*

The idea of the government for a GOTV raffles is perceived negatively. It is considered an offence to the voters whose decision to vote is seen as more valuable than any award the government can give. The respondents did agree that it may influence some of the young voters and those with lower education.

- *They lie and they cheat. This (the raffles) is a big advantage for the NMSII.*
- *It is not an advantage at all. I take it as a bad joke. It is no longer about my beliefs and what I think, but for some award.*

Interest in the campaign is not big, but the respondents were relatively well informed as regards to its course. Regardless of political affiliation, the video spots of the parties are seen as party advertising tricks which will not influence the voters.